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The Questions

Do You Recognize It?

We can imagine all works of art falling along a continuum of recognition. At one end of the continuum is the familiar, the known; at the other extreme is the new, the strange. When we look at figure 1.1, for instance, we immediately recognize a human figure—the figure of a female dancer. We have no doubt; recognition is immediate and seemingly automatic. Even if we were to abstract the figure so that only a hint of “figure” was present, the viewer would most likely still see “figure.” Our minds recognize shapes and references quickly, even when very little visual information is provided. But when we are confronted with something new, something that we do not readily recognize, as in figure 1.2, we must come to an understanding of its nature without the anchor of recognition. Strangeness often bothers us exactly for this reason: we don’t recognize what we see.

Figure 1.1. Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1878–1881. Yellow wax, hair, ribbon, linen bodice, satin shoes, muslin tutu, wood base, overall without base 38 15/16 × 13 11/16 × 13 7/8 in. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.





Figure 1.2. A. H. Thompson, untitled, 1986. Thickened and marbled acrylic paint, 4 × 4 × 1½ in., mounted on linen (shown without integrated black wood frame).

So the first question that we ask is, Do you recognize it? The “it” could be a shape, such as a human figure, or perhaps a style or a strategy used by a particular artist or in a particular tradition. For example, seeing an even repetition of forms might remind us of the art movement minimalism; bizarre imagery and strange juxtapositions, surrealism. The references, at times, seem almost inexhaustible, especially as our knowledge of forms and traditions develops. Some artists, through the uniqueness of their invention, have become closely tied to some shape, gesture, strategy, or ma-

terial: Kazimir Malevich, geometric imagery; Jackson Pollock, the drip; Richard Serra, curved steel plate. These artists and their innovations have now become part of our cultural inheritance and have taken their place along our continuum of recognition.

The capacity for recognition is one tool for gaining understanding of what we see. But once we have dealt with the question of recognition, we actively move beyond easy classification or bewilderment. Then investigation actually starts.

How Big Is It?

We all understand and respond to size, our bodies serving as innate and lasting instruments of measure. Since our first moments, we have navigated an ever-broadening environment of objects and spaces and have measured them in relationship to our bodies (fig. 1.3). From the moment our parents first lifted us into their arms, we have experienced a relational world of “larger than” and “smaller than.” With that knowledge, we have come to understand that size is related to power. The “larger” demands respect and may



Figure 1.3. Child holding blocks. Photograph by Andy Wainwright, 2012.

evoke feelings of confidence or awe or even intimidation, while the “smaller,” allowing greater control, may seem more personal and evoke feelings of intimacy. With time and education, we learn the systems of measurement—of inches and feet, kilometers and cubits—and come to see the world in another way, in a nonintuitive fashion. Though we don’t lose the capabilities we developed earlier in life, we learn to describe aspects of the physical world in a more formal fashion, so that we are able to describe an object sitting on a table, for example, as four inches high and quite easy to pick up and use.

Where Is It?

A dialogue exists between object and place, each speaking the language of its identity. The conversation can be loud, with dramatic contrasts, or quiet, marked by subtle differences. Consider a place: a hardwood forest. It is summer, and trees, bushes, and flowers fill our view, surrounding us in all directions. Above the canopy of trees is the sky; through the air move birds and insects. The atmosphere is warm and humid, the odors multiple and changing as we move through the forest. Sounds of all sorts fill and occasionally pierce the air. Let us now place an object, a cube of metal, in the forest, among the tall trees (fig. 1.4). Listen to its voice, its identity—hard, solid, almost changeless, its shape proclaiming geometry, the concept of its making.

Here in the forest, the dialogue is clear and distinct. The contrasts between object and place are marked, and we instinctively understand differences of identity. If we were to take the cube and place it on a pedestal within a white-walled room—the room that we have come to know as a gallery space—the differences would be dramatically lessened; in fact, the cube might seem to fit right in (fig. 1.5). Differences might still exist, but object and place would speak something of the same language, the language of organization, clarity, and, perhaps, thoughtful indifference to the viewer. So if we view object and place in terms of a dialogue of their differences, we come to understand the power of place to create a tone ranging from agreement to disharmony.



Figure 1.4. Aluminum cube, 12 × 12 × 12 in.



Figure 1.5. Aluminum cube, 12 × 12 × 12 in.

Awareness of place suggests a related concept, the idea of “normal” place. We come to know objects within certain contexts; that is, we expect certain objects to be in certain places. Books, for instance, belong on shelves and on desks and tables; toothbrushes, in a bathroom. Over the course of history, the normal place for works of art has been fluid, changing over time. Sculptural objects, once placed on pedestals, now stand or lie or hang free. Conventions change, indicating cultural shifts in thinking, so that an object once placed inside a building, on a pedestal, might today be found outside, in a forest perhaps. We do not see this object as being in an abnormal place; rather, the normal has grown or shifted to include that which would previously have been considered abnormal.

What Is It Made Of? How Is It Put Together?

All objects are made of some material or combination of materials formed or put together in some manner. Locked within these materials and methods is a history, a history of transformation, of change over time. Each material speaks the language of its physical characteristics—of its texture, durability, and color, for example. The processes by which objects are formed are often hidden from immediate recognition. The wood of the table hides, in a sense, the secrets of the table’s creation from all but the most informed. We forget, or better, do not see, the tools and techniques of felling, transporting, milling, drying, and assemblage. Once wood has been assembled into a recognizable object, a table, it is oftentimes easier for us to see and understand the scratch on the surface, the dent on the leg, or the ring left by a wineglass, obvious reminders of past events. The future also speaks to the attentive. We can imagine a prized table, over time, protected and removed from overt danger and thus not succumbing to any dramatic physical changes. But wood may burn, and styles will certainly change. That which was once thought worthy of special care and attention might, at some future time, come to seem of little value and be discarded. In a way, the past, often hidden from active consideration, is like the future—obscure. But whereas the past can usually be understood through attentiveness or research, the future can only be guessed at. Some guesses—assumptions, really—can be made with assur-

ance or at least a high degree of certainty: iron will surely rust, glass may break, cloth will most likely disintegrate. Each object, at this moment, brings its past ahead to us in time (fig. 1.6) and activates the future in some manner (fig. 1.7).



Figure 1.6. Ashworth Brothers dinner plate, 1850s–1860s. Hand-painted ceramic with traces of original gilding and prominent hairline crack, 1 × 9¼ in.



Figure 1.7. Titanium-clad roof, Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Photograph by Andy Wainwright, 2011.

Is It Stable?

Every object, regardless of size, material, or location, relates to gravity in some fashion. Our relationship to gravity started at our birth. Held by our parents, we were relieved of the necessity of supporting ourselves, but over time, with our first steps, we experienced the physical nature of this force. As we grew, we developed quite naturally a sense of equilibrium and a desire for stability. The force of gravity continues to teach us lessons throughout our lives, as we fall or nearly fall, reach for a heavy book, or drop a glass that then shatters. We bring such experiences and lessons, learned and relearned every day, to our understanding of objects.

Let us now look at an object. It measures thirty-six inches in length and is made of brass, a nonrusting metal commonly used in industry. Let us now place this object in three different orientations—horizontal, vertical, and diagonal—and see how changes in position affect our understanding of the object.

The question is, Is it stable? In the first image, with the bar lying horizontally on the floor (fig. 1.8), we can see that the object is very stable. Gravity is pulling the bar down evenly, and there is very little chance that it will be physically upset.



Figure 1.8. Brass bar, $36 \times 1 \times 1$ in.

Looking now at the next image, we see the bar standing vertically (fig. 1.9). Let us now ask the same question: Is it stable? In this vertical position, with such a small base to stand on, the object could easily be upset if we bumped into it. It stands alert but is ever in danger of falling. It is stable, but for how long? you might wonder.

If you were asked to place the bar in a diagonal position, you might accomplish the task by leaning the bar against a wall (fig. 1.10). You would realize that without the support of the wall, the bar would surely fall. The bar cannot physically stand between the vertical and the horizontal without some such aid. With this aid the bar is quite stable, but without it, gravity would immediately cause the bar to fall.

Every object is more stable or less stable. When experiencing objects, we intuitively feel their degree of stability and make appropriate emotive associations. For instance, a very stable horizontal object causes us to feel the calm inherent in this orientation, while



Figure 1.9. Brass bar, $36 \times 1 \times 1$ in.

Figure 1.10. Brass bar, $36 \times 1 \times 1$ in.



a vertical object causes us to consider the degree of effort needed to maintain this position and the ever-present threat of collapse. The diagonal's inherent instability causes us to feel tension and energy, perhaps excitement.

How Many Are There?

Let us look at a brass sphere (fig. 1.11). It stands alone, surrounded by empty space. Since there are no other objects present, the sphere is the obvious focal point, the center of our attention.



Figure 1.11. Brass sphere, 1 in. diameter.



Figure 1.12. Brass spheres, 1 in. diameter.

Let us now look at another image, this one presenting two brass spheres (fig. 1.12). They rest side by side, close to each other. Like the solitary sphere in figure 1.11, these spheres also create a single focal point. Though each is a separate entity, their proximity and shared physical characteristics unite them, drawing them together somehow.

Let us return to the solitary sphere and consider it. The sphere stands alone in that empty space—no doubt, no ambiguity, just presence and definiteness. Think about other solitary presences—a church on a hill, a monument to the lost, a book held in your hands. How definite they all are. Each demands attention and is seen as we

often see ourselves, as an individual. With no visual competition, each of these solitary objects declares its presence with assurance.

The two spheres, in contrast, bring us to a very different mental state. Paired, they seem united and separated at the same time. We recognize their identical characteristics, but we also notice the space between them. Depending on how much space separates them, we will feel their attraction or their separation. Side by side, they form a pair; separated by a greater distance, they become individuals again.

If we were to increase the number of spheres, our understanding of them would change. Depending on the number of spheres and their spatial arrangement, we would draw various conclusions. Imagine a large number of spheres randomly placed on a



Figure 1.13. Brass spheres, 1 in. diameter.

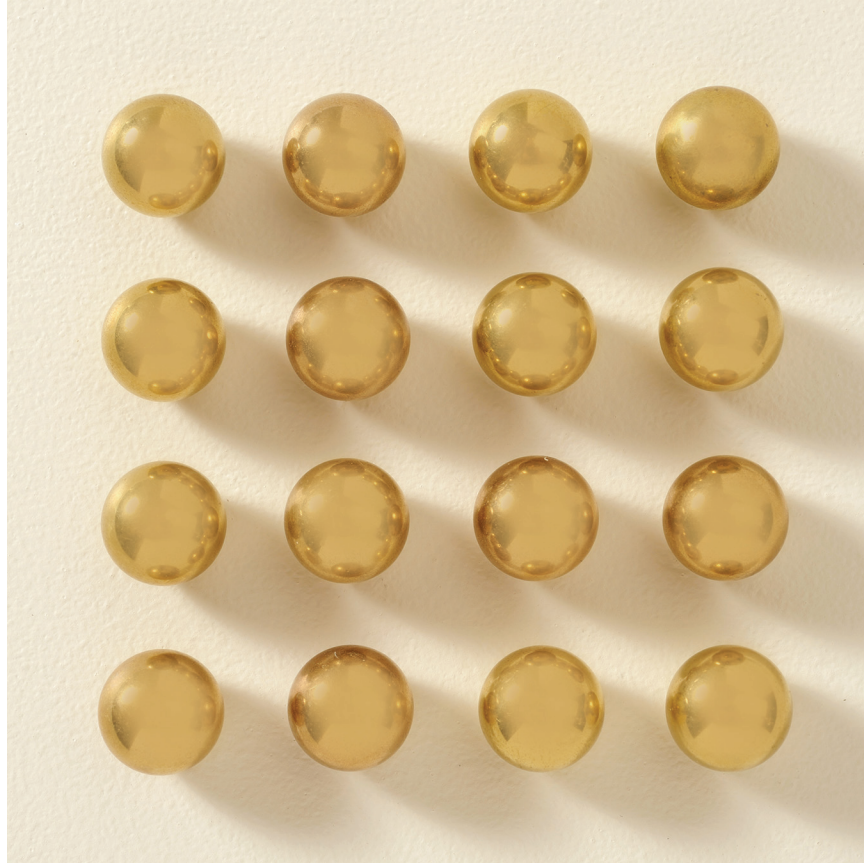


Figure 1.14. Brass spheres, 1 in. diameter.

surface (fig. 1.13); now imagine the same number placed in a grid pattern (fig. 1.14). The viewer would make obvious associations in each scenario: chaos, chance, perhaps freedom in the one; order, stability, perhaps regimentation in the other.

In thinking about number and arrangement—or, for that matter, about any other physical characteristic—we bring our understanding of our physical and cultural world, the world that we have been navigating since birth, to our understanding of works of art. Creative artists, responding to and sharing this same physical and cultural reality, intuitively follow patterns, eliciting responses that allow for our shared understanding.

As we continue exploring objects, we realize that we might also ask

How many colors?
How many shapes?
How many textures?
How many directions?
How many materials?
How many places?

We can ask the question, How many? of any physical characteristic. In responding to the questions, we must become aware of the ramifications of the artist's choices. A work with many colors might seem very active; a uniform texture might calm the viewing experience; a work occupying two different places might create a dialogue or perhaps a feeling of separateness and isolation. A successful work of art does not disclose its identity easily or blatantly. There are usually multiple ways of understanding what we are experiencing. It is with a thoughtful investigation of possibilities that we come to understand the richness of a work of art.

How Do You Physically Interact with It?

Each object possesses characteristics that cause us to interact with it in some fashion. We readily pick up a pen because it is small and functionally identifiable. We pass our hands over a sweater knowing that it will be soft. We pick up broken glass carefully because we know that the shards may cut us. Throughout our lives we learn lessons through our interaction with the physical world. We touch ice and feel cold; we slip and feel our loss of balance; the sun warms our face and the rain dampens our clothes. Over and over again the smooth surface is smooth and the jagged edge remains jagged. This cup fits comfortably into our hand, while the edge of that table cuts into our arm. Certain smells attract us; others repel. These lessons, continually reinforced, are at times refined by the introduction of new information. This edge may feel slightly different from that edge; this smooth surface feels like glass, while that one feels like wood. Through cultural conventions, we learn that in a museum

we are not to touch the sculpture on the pedestal nor to pass our hand over the surface of a painting. Over time, with knowledge adequately learned, we can anticipate. We know, for instance, that when driving we must slow down when approaching a curve and that the lid that needs lifting from boiling water will burn our fingers if we are not careful. We now know, before entering the museum, that we must be quiet and respectful once inside.

We can see how well we have incorporated those lessons by watching students interact with sculptural objects in the classroom. Given permission to interact freely with the objects, students know intuitively how to approach them: This hanging object is gently nudged, while that one is given a strong push. Some containers are picked up and shaken, while others are only looked at. This floor piece is circled, but that one is stepped through. We put our noses to one surface and smell it, while never dreaming of doing so to another surface. Our competencies seem staggering. Quite naturally, it seems, we interact with sculptural objects in an appropriate and similar manner. In a way, we have all learned the same lessons and have generally learned them well.

What Similarities and Differences Do You See?

Here are two objects, presented side by side, close to each other, sharing the same place, at the same time (fig. 1.15). Both objects are made of metal. Both are cubic in form. We do not know the objects' actual size, but we do know that they are the same size. We see a commonality of characteristics, but also marked differences. The one object appears to be a solid metal block, but since we are looking at a photograph, we are unable to say definitively that the block is solid. If we could experience it, we could employ other senses besides sight to understand its true nature. We could try to lift it to determine its weight; we could pass our hands over the surface to feel its temperature and texture; we could examine its edges and surface closely to ascertain the method of construction; we could tap it, and listen.

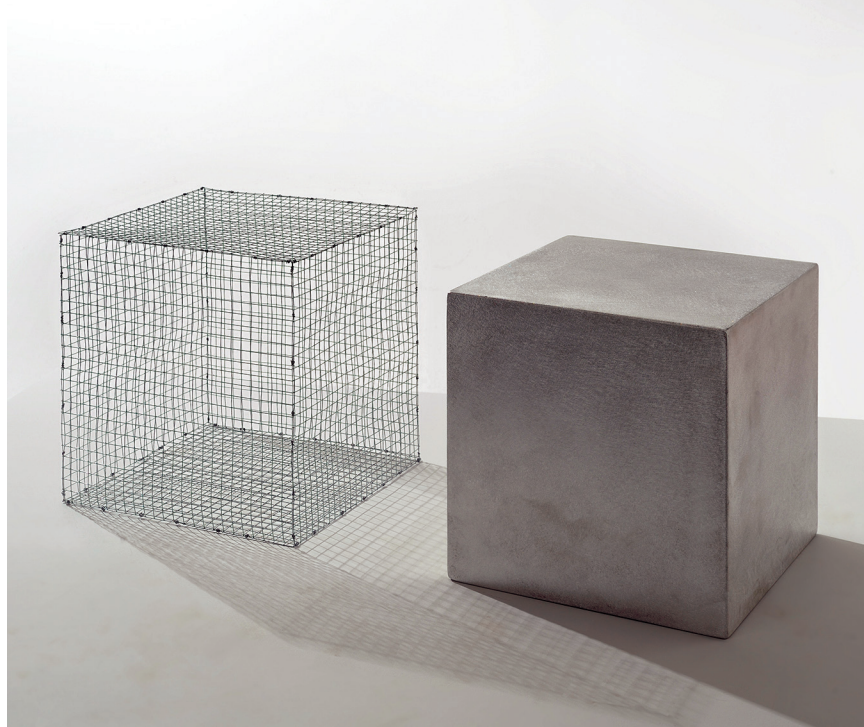


Figure 1.15. *Left*, galvanized steel hardware-cloth cube, 12 × 12 × 12 in.; *right*, aluminum cube, 12 × 12 × 12 in.

Let us assume, however, that the block is solid. With an appropriate knowledge of metals, we would recognize it as aluminum, commonly used in industry for its strength, light weight, and durability. At present, the block appears very stable, and given its material qualities, we can be reasonably assured of its longevity. If we imagine its future, say, in one hundred years, we can be relatively certain that it will exist in much the same condition as we now see it in. Its past, present, and future are, in a sense, united, sharing the same physical qualities over time.

In contrast, let us look at the second object, the cage-like structure. Again, with an appropriate knowledge of metals, we would recognize galvanized steel hardware cloth as the material used in its fabrication. This metal is also very stable and unlikely to dete-

riorate over long periods of time. But is this object's future equally secure? Would this object survive the next one hundred years? We might pause. Those thin walls could easily be crushed. We recognize, in fact, a quite fragile object here, one whose future is not physically secure.

We see from these examples that we make assumptions about the future when experiencing objects in the present. We may not actually be aware of making such judgments, but our minds are registering them. As our knowledge of materials and processes increases, we become more and more capable of making these kinds of judgments.

The aluminum block, in form and material, approaches an ideal state. We are led, as observers, to geometry, timelessness, and perfection. The cage-like structure, much more subject to real-world forces and possessing characteristics that remind us of the real world, causes us to think of the here and now, the temporal world of utility and change over time.

These two objects, for all their shared characteristics, are thus essentially quite different.

Some Additional Questions We Might Ask

- **What Is the Role of Color?** Whenever we encounter an object, we experience its color or combination of colors. Color is critical to our understanding of objects. Color can visually unify or break up a form; disguise or hide an inherent surface; lead us rhythmically; evoke emotions; or create physical sensations. We must remember, also, that some aspects of color appreciation are culture-specific and can be understood only through research. Our intuitive sense, therefore, must at times be called into question, especially when we encounter objects from different cultures or times.
- **Does the Object Move?** All objects assume an attitude toward movement. Some objects are immovable or very nearly so (think of a mountain or a building); others are seldom stationary (think of a feather floating in the air). Those objects that do move may move very slowly, like a lava flow,

or very quickly, like rushing water. Movement, both actual and implied, has characteristics that evoke physical and emotional responses. Whether continuous and repeated, or interrupted and unique, movement is vital to an object's identity.

- **Can You Enter the Object?** Imagine how many times you have entered a building, opened a bureau drawer, or filled a glass with water. In all these cases, you were allowed to enter an object in some fashion. Some objects, however, do not allow such entry, forcing the viewer-participant to remain on the outside (think, for example, of a rock). Whether we are allowed inside an object or are forced to remain on the outside, the repercussions are significant to our experience and understanding of the object.
- **How Do You Visually Move Through the Object?** All objects present an array of visual characteristics. When we view an object, our eyes are often led from one characteristic to another, with some aspects assuming greater importance than others. Oftentimes a visual contrast in color or size, or perhaps a certain shape, causes us to proceed in a specific fashion. In a sense, we follow a hierarchy of interest and come to know the object in this dynamic way.

What Is the Object's Cultural Foundation?

In September 1921, for the exhibition *5 × 5 = 25: An Exhibition of Painting*, the Russian artist Alexander Rodchenko exhibited three painted canvases titled *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color*. As their titles indicate, they were painted pure red, pure yellow, and pure blue. They were moderate in size, measuring about twenty-four inches by twenty inches, and were evenly painted. Imagine, for a moment, if we could somehow see these paintings again, experiencing them directly, as the viewers did in 1921 (fig. 1.16). What would we think? What could we logically say about the paintings?



Figure 1.16. Facsimile of Alexander Rodchenko, *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color*, 1921. MDF, latex paint, 24 × 20 × ½ in. (each panel).

Undoubtedly we would recognize the colors red, yellow, and blue—the primary colors. All other colors derived from pigments can be created, in theory, using these three hues. In this way, the primaries are unique, fundamental, and essential. These qualities would probably seem important to us if we were trying to understand our viewing experience. But beyond this, what could we say? We might appreciate the paintings for their colors alone, finding them beautiful perhaps. We might recall associations that we have when viewing each color. But we would probably ask, Why did the artist make these paintings? In themselves, simply as colors, the paintings would not seem significant to us. We would probably feel that we needed more information if we were to understand them as works of art.

And our intuition would be correct. Art is created within cultures. Works of art are cultural products with cultural significance and, as such, cannot be understood solely in physical terms. To fully understand a work of art, we must understand its cultural aspects. The physical aspects that we have been discussing—materials, methods, size, place, number, and all the rest—are in themselves inadequate to fully explain what we are experiencing.

In the case of the Rodchenko triptych, one must return to revolutionary Russia. Artists at that time were passionately debating the role that was envisioned for the artist in the new communist

society. At issue was the individual artist, intuitively “composing” works of art and exhibiting them within a system of galleries, for individual edification and profit—much as in our culture today. Revolutionary artists wanted to overthrow the old artistic ways—the practices, institutions, and products of the old Russia. Intuition would be replaced by rational decision making; private galleries, by museums; individual desire and self-aggrandizement, by societal needs and responsibilities. Painting would be replaced by the constructed product, rationally conceived and designed and serving a practical, functional purpose. In time, avant-garde artists would come to make fabric patterns for dresses, invent machinery for industry, and design woodstoves for the home. It was within this context that Rodchenko painted his canvases, as a declaration, really. Painting, and all that it had entailed and stood for in prerevolutionary Russia, was finished, replaced by a new artistic purpose, dynamic, and product.

Properly seen in this context, the Rodchenko panels symbolize not only the death of painting but also the birth of the new order. Birth and death, like pure red, pure yellow, and pure blue, unique, fundamental, and essential. The seemingly insignificant has become charged with meaning and purpose. What we needed was an understanding, not only of the physical logic of the paintings, but of their cultural logic as well. Together, in dynamic interrelationship, these two logics create the significance we search for when we view a work of art and try to understand what we are experiencing. But the task can be difficult; for though the physical logic can be grasped quite easily, the cultural logic, if it is to be understood at all, must be learned through research and study.